PRESS FREEDOM IN TUNISIA

Censorship is a basic element in the police state set up by President Ben Ali. The press – both private and official – is characterised by its uniform tone. All information likely to be used to criticise the government is censored, even in areas which seem far removed from issues of state, such as the environment and cultural heritage. Before publication, politically sensitive articles are sent to the interior ministry, although journalists often prefer to censor their own work rather than risking trouble.

The authorities have transformed a system of registration which originally was simply a formality for archiving purposes into an instrument of censorship. Every edition of a newspaper has to be submitted to the interior ministry for registration before publication. Refusal by the ministry to register it amounts to a ban. Moreover, several applications for authorisation to publish filed by new titles have gone unanswered. On 16 November 1999, for exemple, Sihem Ben Sedrine filed an application with the interior minister for authorisation for a new title *Kalima*. The police administrative services refused to register his application. Because of this ban she decided to create a webmagazine, www.kalima.com. But the authorities also sought to control the emergence of the Internet. In 1996, Internet access was finally authorised, but it remains narrowly controlled by the State, with the creation of the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) which supervises the two only companies providing access to the world network. These two private companies, planet.tn and globalnet.tn, have close links with the regime; one is run by President Ben Ali's daughter and the other by a person close to a family member. And access to some sites, like www.kalima.com or www.rsf.fr (Reporters sans frontières website) whose addresses have been previously recorded is permanently blocked.

The year 2000 was marked by Tawfik Ben Brik's hunger strike in April and May. The journalist with the daily *La Croix* and the *Infosud* and *Syfia* news agencies, wanted to protest against the steady harassment by the Tunisian authorities : anonymous threatening phone calls, his phone and fax lines cut, his home kept under police surveillance, confiscation of his passport, his car vandalised, insults, aggressions etc.

Other journalists who dared to criticise the regime, have been threatened in 2000 and 2001. On 15 December 2000, plainclothes police officers assaulted Sihem Bensedrine, director of the weekly *Kalima*, as she was going to the Ministry of Health to give the minister a petition protesting Marzouki's improper dismissal from the Sousse Faculty of Medecine. A few hours before the attack, Sihem Bensedrine found that her car had been searched. She found a knife in the back seat of her car, which she believes was left as a death threat. On 26 January 2001, several dozen plainclothes police officers took up position in front of Ben Brik's home. At the time, about 100 people had gathered at the Tunisian journalist's home for a press conference launching the newspaper *Kaws el Karama* (*The Arch of Dignity*), edited by his brother, Zoghlami. The police officers stopped people from entering Ben Brik's house and followed other individuals who were leaving. An activist from the student movement Slah Hind was beaten by the police officers, who also confiscated copies of the newspaper from persons who were leaving Ben Brik's home. The first issue of *Kaws el Karama* carries the headline: "Ben Ali, thirteen years, basta!".

On 12 January, the Tunisian authorities seized issue 198 of the weekly *El Mawkif* at the printing house. The authorities provided no explanation for their action. This issue of the newspaper included the manifesto of the National Conference on Freedoms and Democracy, which was held in Tunis on 1 July 2000, as well as articles about the recent trials of human rights activists. Because of its independent stand, this weekly, an organ of the Progressive Socialist Union (Rassemblement socialiste progressiste), is the only opposition newspaper to be denied the public subsidy and advertising inserts allocated by the state and public and semi-public companies.

Two Islamist journalist have been jailed since 1992. Hamadi Jebali, managing editor of the weekly *Al Fajr*, the unofficial organ of the Islamist movement Ennahda, was sentenced by a court martial in Tunis to 16 years' imprisonment for "aggression with the intention to change

the nature of the state" and "membership of an illegal organisation". He had just spent a year in jail after being sentenced on 31 January 1991 for publishing an article criticising the system of military courts. Abdellah Zouari, also with *Al Fajr*, was arrested on 12 April 1991 and sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment for "membership of an illegal organisation". The two journalists were tried on 28 August 1992 with 277 members of the Ennahda movement, for "an Islamist plot". International standards of fairness were flouted (vague charges, torture, arbitrary detention, limited access to lawyers). Since their sentence Hamadi Jebali and Abdellah Zouari have been held in harsh conditions: over-crowded cells, problems obtaining medicines, limited family visits and pressure on their lawyers.